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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 YAOUNDE 000033

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SUBJECT: CAMEROON: CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUE HEATS UP

REF: A. YAOUNDE 009

[1](#)B. 07 YAOUNDE 1478
[1](#)C. 07 YAOUNDE 1476 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 b and d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: President Paul Biya's New Year's speech, in which he announced his intention to "reconsider" changing the constitution, particularly presidential term limits (ref A), has sent shock waves throughout Cameroon. The private media, many civil society activists, and some opposition figures have been highly critical, though their influence remains weak. The main opposition SDF party led a small demonstration in Douala. On January 10, a prominent human rights activist was interrogated by police for voicing opposition. There are opponents of term limit change within the ruling CPDM party, though they are timid and unlikely to press the issue. It is likely the President will move ahead with changing the term limits in the constitution, possibly in March. However, the broader political context -- a more aggressive anti-corruption campaign, rumblings of a Cabinet shuffle, Biya's famous unpredictability, and ambivalence among some in the diplomatic community -- complicate forecasts and our future efforts to walk Biya back on the term limit issue. End Summary.

Civil Society's Reaction

[1](#)2. (C) President Biya's remarks about constitutional change in his New Year's address continue to dominate media attention. The private press has been highly critical of constitutional change, which is almost universally seen as an attempt by Biya to stay in office after his current term expires in 2011. Some NGO activists have also been outspoken against changing term limits and pushing for a referendum. Hilaire Kamga, a prominent civil society leader, told poloff that civil society NGOs would work with opposition parties (and, covertly, with some CPDM parliamentarians) to combat a constitutional amendment. If a constitutional change becomes unstoppable, they will argue that any constitutional change must be done through a referendum, he said. One NGO has reportedly begun a signature campaign opposing constitutional change. According to press reports, some Cameroonian diaspora groups in the U.S. and Europe have also mobilized

against constitutional change.

Opposition Party Voices

13. (U) On January 6, 200 members of the opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) Provincial Executive Committee held an impromptu march in Douala holding signs that said, "Biya Must Leave in 2011." The organizers predicted that within two weeks there would be a much larger demonstration. SDF Secretary General Elizabeth Tamajong said "every Cameroonian

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who cares about the well-being of this country should join us." According to press reports, SDF leader John Fru Ndi stated: "I am calling on all civil servants and all Cameroonians to stand up and resist this attempt at a constitutional revision."

14. (SBU) Bernard Muna, President of the Alliance of Progressive Forces (AFP) party, publicly stated that the AFP opposed a constitutional amendment. He elaborated that there were many items in the constitution that have not been implemented; therefore, the President should focus on implementation, not amendment. Samuel Mack Kit, leading a faction of the Union de Population de Cameroon (UPC), denounced the President's New Year comments as "a declaration of war against all the people." Dr. Pierre Ngayap, Secretary General of the National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP), told Poloff the party has yet to decide whether it supports a constitutional amendment, though he conceded the majority of its members oppose it.

Voices Within the CPDM

YAOUNDE 00000033 002 OF 004

15. (C) Neither President Biya nor the ruling CPDM have made official statements about constitutional change since Biya's New Year's address. Some CPDM stalwarts have voiced motions of support for removing presidential term limits. Some (probably most) in the CPDM argue for broad constitutional changes, including an amendment to term limits (Article 6.2), while others in the party believe Article 6.2 should be left untouched in any discussion of broader amendments. Privately, there are notable voices of dissent. Outspoken member of the CPDM Central Committee Charles Ateba Eyene told us there was a sharp division in the party between the older and the younger generation. He said the majority of the CPDM Central Committee members oppose amending Section 6.2; however, they did not have the courage to voice their opposition.

16. (C) CPDM Parliamentarian and Vice President of the National Assembly Rose Abunaw told poloff she and many other CPDM Parliamentarians disagree with the amendment, but for the sake of party discipline and to retain their lives and jobs, they would vote for an amendment if the President sends such a bill to the National Assembly. She opined that if the voting process were secret, the amendment would not pass; however, she said that Article 53 of the Standing Orders of the National Assembly requires all votes for a constitutional amendment to be done through an open ballot. She expected the proposed amendment would be sent to the Assembly in March 2008 and would pass without difficulty. A prominent government journalist (and CPDM member) also confirmed to Pol/Econ Chief that many in the party are uncomfortable with changing the term limit, especially without consulting the grass roots, but that party discipline will prevail in support of Biya. He had also no doubt the President would pursue a term limit change in the near future.

17. (C) We have begun sounding out our diplomatic colleagues on the constitutional issue and will have more discussions in the coming weeks. None of our diplomatic colleagues have yet made public statements or, to our knowledge, engaged the GRC about the constitutional debate.

-- France: Phillipe Truquet, French DCM to Cameroon, told Pol/Econ Chief that France sees the ongoing debate about changing the constitution as an internal affair for Cameroonians to decide. France will not make statements or press Biya on the term limit issue, he said, although he conceded that France was also surprised and displeased by the timing of Biya's New Year's announcement about constitutional change. Biya should focus on economic growth and reducing poverty at this time, not on constitutional change, especially given rising economic frustrations, Truquet opined. He could only envision Paris weighing in on the term limit issue if the political debate about the constitution generated significant opposition to a level which threatened internal stability. Truquet's advice to others in the international community was: wait to see what Biya does with constitutional change before making any intervention.

-- Netherlands: Dutch Ambassador Norbert Braakhuis told Ambassador the constitutional issue was "a smoke screen." Biya wants to burnish his reputation in his later years, he opined. By creating the impression he will run again, Biya is guarding against any impression he is a lame duck and strengthening his hand to clean out dead wood in his Cabinet, tackle corruption and improve the economy, Braakhuis said, adding that Biya knows he faces little opposition but wants to give people more of a reason to vote for him if he were to run again. Braakhuis told Pol/Econ Chief separately that the Dutch government would have difficulty objecting to changing the term limit because the Netherlands has a monarchy and a Prime Minister with no term limits. He thought other European governments would have a similar difficulty taking a stand on this issue.

YAOUNDE 00000033 003 OF 004

-- The United Kingdom: The usually outspoken UK High Commissioner is out of the country, but UKHC poloff told us the British Government was still formulating a position, taking as precedent the UK's position in Nigeria. At the moment, the UK's approach is likely to be a public call for an inclusive and transparent debate of the merits of constitutional change and "private" appeals to President Biya to "consider his legacy," i.e., to gently encourage Biya to step back from any constitutional adventures. UKHC poloff anticipated that the High Commission would want to revisit this stance and possibly adjust it to be more forward-leaning, an approach that he thought would be more likely if the USG and "perhaps one other EU country" would be seen to be similarly inclined. UKHC poloff assessed that the German Embassy would be the most likely among other EU missions to stake out such a public position. (We will sound out the Germans here in the coming week.)

Increasingly Complex Political Context

18. (C) The constitutional debate is taking place amidst signs of heightened political infighting and uncertainty. Some of our CPDM contacts told us the President would now accelerate his anti-corruption campaign to appease the critics of his efforts to change the constitution. We have seen several recent major anti-corruption convictions (ref C). Possibly part of such an effort was a leaked document, extensively covered in the January 9 media, detailing the Minister of Justice's efforts to crack down on a list of senior officials implicated in corruption (which we will

report septel). At the least, this now-public list will increase tensions within the Cabinet. Rumors are also swirling of another imminent Cabinet shuffle, possibly replacing the Prime Minister and President of the National Assembly, establishing the long-awaited Senate, and creating a Vice Presidential post. In addition, we have heard the President is making a list of those in his Cabinet and inner circle supporting his move for constitutional change. Many media pundits and political contacts see the current maneuvering as a prelude to the President not only amending the constitution during the next parliamentary session in March, but changing the mandate of the President from a seven to a five year term and calling (and running in) fresh elections in 2009.

Comment

¶9. (C) The SDF demonstration and public opposition to constitutional change has been limited. However, in a worrying development designed to intimidate the opposition, security forces on January 10 interrogated civil society activist Hilaire Kamga (para 2) for two hours about his vocal stand on the constitutional issue and his relations with political parties and diplomats. In response, on January 11, prominent human rights activist and President of the Independent Commission Against Discrimination and Corruption Jean Claude Shanda Tonme issued a communique strongly condemning the interrogation of Kamga as "fascist", criticizing constitutional change, warning "those who want to plunge the country in civil war", and reminding Cameroonians to "learn the lessons from the situation in Kenya". The Kamga incident could galvanize more opposition reaction.

¶10. (C) Some of our contacts believe the frustrations following the New Year speech have reached a new height. One long-time observer of Cameroon told Pol/Econ Chief this is the first time since the 1990-92 violence that he is worried about serious social unrest. French DCM Truquet, who has been here for almost three years, echoed similar concerns of deep public discontent exacerbated by growing economic hardships. In the current complex, more strained political and social context, our efforts -- publicly and privately -- to push back on amending the constitution will be difficult and could carry major weight in the current internal political dynamics. It will also, we believe, be welcomed by a large number of Cameroonians.

YAOUNDE 00000033 004 OF 004

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